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ABSTRACT

After criticising the prevalent assumption of organizational theory that organizational behavior is based on common typological forms, this paper proposes a political analysis of schools as organizations as a practical theory general enough to be useful to practitioners. The first section reviews the basic elements of comparative structural analysis and demonstrates how these elements both inform and limit the study of school districts as organizations. The alternative "loosely coupled systems" approach is considered, and a political organizational framework for the study of schools is endorsed. The second section outlines the elements of a political analysis of school districts as organizations, identifying key actors in schools, specifying linkages between actors, and delineating the types of strategies and tactics used to advance various actors' interests. The final section discusses the implications of a political perspective for educational practitioners, particularly those involved in organizational design, offering examples of design alternatives that would assist in the achievement of consensus. (Author/MJL)

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# THE GENERATION OF PRACTICAL THEORY: SCHOOLS AS POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS

In: Consensus and Power in School Organizations

By

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Much of the work in organizational behavior is based on the unstated assumption that there are basic, typological forms which are common to all organizations. This is most apparent in the field of comparative organizational analysis where, despite repeated calls to attend to the unique characteristics of specific organizational forms (e.g., Clegg and Dunkerly, 1980; Pinder and Moore, 1979), the principles of relationships between sets of structures and component processes are often haphazardly generalized from one type of organization to another. Inevitably, the specifics of the empirical referents are lost and the emergent theoretical generalizations come to the forefront, thus preventing the development of precise variables and situations which are relevant in a given type of organization. This lack of specificity regarding the unique empirical reality of particular types of organizations has resulted in a set of theories which at best are difficult to apply to the practical concerns of organizational design, development, and management.

In this paper, we will focus on one of the more dramatic illustrations of this tendency, namely the study of school districts as organizations. In the first section, we will review the basic elements of a comparative structural analysis and demonstrate how these elements both inform and limit the study of school districts as organizations. Alternative approaches to the study of schools as organizations will be noted, and a political organizational framework for the study of schools will be proposed. In the second section, the requirements of a political analysis of schools as organizations will be discussed. Attention will be paid to identifying the key actors in schools, specifying the linkages between these actors, and delineating the types of strategies and tactics used in schools to create and maintain consensus. In the final section, the implications

of a political perspective for educational practitioners, particularly those involved in organizationsl design, will be discussed.

I. The Limits of Generalization.

Organizational theory as an arena for scholarly activity has had a tendency to develop general, overarching theories with an assumed applicability for all organizations. There is usually little effort directed toward examining or specifying how these overarching theories will empirically unfold in daily organizational life. The purpose of this section is to illustrate how this tendency toward theoretical generalization can prevent a thorough understanding of schools as organizations.

A. Structuralist Analysis.

The limits of generalization are most apparent if we consider the type of analysis undertaken by the comparative structuralists (e.g., Blau and Schoenner, 1971; Hage and Aiken, 1970; Pugh, et. al., 1968). While this research perspective dominated the late 60s and 70s, today it remains the context within which most comparative research is conducted. In essence, this approach has accepted a causal model of organizational life which is composed of four crude composite elements: 1) external constraints; 2) structure; 3) process; and 4) output. External constraints have been primarily cast as the environment and the technological factors that affect the internal structures and processes of the organization. The internal structures have often been discussed in terms of the morphology of the organization, e.g., size, differentiation, span of control, role specialization, etc. (Hall, 1981; Aldrich, 1979; Bacharach, 1978). Structures, in this context, are viewed as independent of the action which they may encompass. That is, structures are objectified, reified aggregate characteristics of organizations. Processes are the actual tasks carried

out by actors in pursuit of their work activity. To that end, processes involve the behavior of specific actors or groups of actors in pursuit of functional goals. Therefore, unlike structures, organizational processes are more difficult to reify; tend to envelop a more cognitive component; are therefore more subjective; and should not be studied on an aggregate level. Output is seen as an indicator of organizational performance or achievement.

A basic linkage between the external constraints and the internal structures and processes would suggest that under particular environmental and/or technological conditions, specific structural configurations and patterns of processes will emerge (Perrow, 1967; Aldrich, 1979; McKelvey, 1983). For example, it is maintained that under positive economic conditions, organizations can afford to expand, and therefore will emerge as larger and more differentiated. Likewise, it is suggested that specific types of technologies can lead to different levels of differentiation and role specialization, the basic axiom being that routine technologies will be associated with a high degree of differentiation and role specialization, while non-routine technologies will be associated with low levels of differentiation and role specialization. Parallel assumptions govern the relationships between external constraints and the internal processes of organizational life. For example, under conditions of a turbulent environment work processes may involve a higher level of role ambiguity and role conflict, while under conditions of a stable environment, work processes may involve a low level of role ambiguity and role conflict. Likewise, when the constraining technology is non-routine, we would expect a high level of role ambiguity and role conflict, while routine technologies

will be associated with low levels of role ambiguity and role conflict. The final set of variables, i.e., output, are viewed as contingent upon the interactions among the three previous sets of variables. An effective organization is one in which there is an appropriate match among structures, processes, and external constraints.

This general orientation to organizational analysis may be broadly described as contingency analysis. That is, output is contingent on the main effects and interactive effects of different sets of variables. Seven sets of effects may be listed: 1) output is contingent upon the main effect of external constraints; 2) output is contingent upon the main effect of process variables; 3) output is contingent upon the main effect of structural variables; 4) output is contingent upon the interaction of external constraints and processes; 5) output is contingent upon the interaction of external constraints and structures; 6) output is contingent upon the interaction effect of structures and processes, and 7) output is contingent upon the three-way interaction effect of external constraints, structure, and process.

Researchers of the last fifteen years have placed differential emphasis on each one of these relationships. Regardless of which relationship they choose to emphasize, however, researchers utilizing the structualist perspective employ the organization as their unit of analysis. Those who adopt such an orientation may be accused of reifying and anthropomorphizing organizations (Bacharach, 1978). In the former instance, they treat organizations as organic entities that are part of the natural world and subject to their own principles of operation (Wolin, 1969); in the latter instance, they fall into the trap of dealing with organizations

as actors, as evidenced by the use of such terms as organizational control, organizational power, and organizational communication (Weick, 1969). An analysis of the organization as a whole assumes that it is a rational system of interdependent units functionally held together by a common goal. Empirically, the appearance of a harmonious whole is enhanced through the use of aggregate data as the basis of analysis. Such a perspective assumes a uniform effect of structure and process across the organization, combining scores to create one measure of each variable for the total organization.

While such an approach may aid in the pursuit of the generic typological forms which are common to all organizations, for practitioners and those who view organizations as organic entities composed of everything from affect to politics, such a perspective is extremely limited. Indeed, those who live in organizations, more so than those who study organizations, are constantly aware of the idiosyncracies inherent in organizational life. It is these idiosyncracies that the structuralist perspective has sacrificed in pursuit of the generic typological forms which are common to all organizations.

The idiosyncratic component of organizational life may be defined as the non-patterned behavior of groups and actors within organizations. For the most part, organizational behavior as a discipline has ignored those types of behaviors. That is, in our pursuit of the common patterns which we somehow believe make for good science, we have ignored cognition, volition, and self interest. The clearest example of this may be seen in terms of organizational behavior's inability to incorporate strategic decision making into the contingent model. Simply put, for the environment to have an impact on specific structures and internal processes, key actors

in the organization must cognitively interpret the environment, voluntarily choose among strategic alternatives, and, based on their notion of what's either in their best interest or the organization's best interest, implement changes. Organizations do not adapt; individuals adjust. The common patterns that we speak of when we talk of external constraints, structures, and processes limit alternatives and/or enhance uncertainty, but they tell us little or nothing about the deductive logic which enters into the decision implementation process. To a large degree, the analysis of organizations has become free of strategic actors. We cast organizations not as emergent phenomena dependent on the conscious calculations of actors but rather as sui generis entities governed by abstract self-fulfilling macro principles. Recent work concerning the ecology of organizations and organizational demography is only the latest manifestation of this tendency (Hannan and Freeman, 1977; McKelvey, 1983; Aldrich, 1980). While there is great merit in the scientific and aesthetic appeal of such a nomethetic approach, for the practitioner who is concerned with the redesign of an organization, this tendency to ignore the strategic actor results in a gap between theory and practice.

B. The Structural Analysis of Schools.

In this context, let us specifically examine what the principles of a structural analysis have to say to the practitioner in the field of education. Educational organizations may serve as clear examples of the limitation of the applicability of organizational theory to the specific concerns of organizational practitioners.

We have already seen that the structuralist analysis adopts a causal model of organizational life which places primary emphasis on the determinants of organizational output. For educational practitioners, the most obvious

output relates to the educational attainment of the students. In primary and secondary education this has included a concern with such items as minimizing drop-out rates, increasing the percentage of students who continue their education beyond high school, and obtaining high achievement scores, particularly in reading and math. Adopting a structural perspective, one would want to select a specific set of outputs and then examine the affect of environment, structure, and process on these outputs.

Bidwell and Kasarda (1975) exemplify this approach and a brief consideration of their work will highlight some of the limitations of a structuralist analysis of schools and organizations. Examining their research, we discover that the primary operationalization of effectiveness in terms of scholastic achievement is the reading and mathematical ability of the student. While such items have the distinct advantage of being susceptible to relatively objective measures, they tend to be embedded in a narrow conceptualization of school districts. Specifically, we cannot equate the goals of elementary schools with the goals of high schools. While it may be true that Bidwell and Kasarda's operationalization of achievement, sixth grade reading and math achievement test scores, are appropriate measures of effectiveness for elementary schools, it can be argued that reading and math scores for its students may be viewed as an independent variable when examining secondary school effectiveness. To examine reading and math scores is to miss the primary mission of the secondary schools, i.e., to socialize students toward maximization of career plans. Instead, these scores remain an examination of the success or failure of the primary education in the district rather than the secondary education in the district. Point in fact: the old truism maintained by high school teachers, that once students have begun their secondary education

it is too late to teach them to read and cipher, appears to hold true. Students with reading problems and "math anxiety" in high school are reduced to remedial education and in their instance, the primary focus of success in the high school is preventing them from dropping out.

Two points are worth noting. First, even where there may be agreement as to one of the organization's primary goals, this does not mean that measures of this goal will be easy to identify. Output and its measures are problematic. Second, even if possible measures of goal achievement can be found, one cannot assume that they are applicable to the entire organization. Treating the organization as a whole conceals important differences within the system. Further, while we are using output as an example, the same argument applies to structure and process. Thus, while it is possible to construct aggregate measures of structure and process for the entire district, these measures would conceal the very substantial differences which exist between structure and process on the secondary versus the elementary level (e.g., Bacharach, 1983).

The failure to take account of the variations in structure, process, and output which exist across schools within a district severely limits the practical application of the results produced by a structural analysis of schools. Critics of this perspective have also noted the tendency to overlook the internal dynamics of schools and the various tensions which exist within the organization (e.g., Silverman, 1971). This tendency also detracts from the practical utility of the structural approach. This becomes apparent if we consider one of the primary sources contributing to the internal dynamics and tensions present in school districts, namely the need for educational administrators to satisfy goals related to administrative efficiency, as well as those goals related to educational

attainment.

Among the dimensions that may be considered under administrative efficiency are the ability to: decrease employee turnover; initiate innovation; minimize costs per output; tap state and federal funds, etc. On the surface, these seem like goals that everyone would see as valid. But suppose that reading scores in a school or district had decreased dramatically over a two or three year period. Given the fundamental importance of educational attainment as a goal, the obvious reaction to this decline would be to look for a possible remedy which would help raise reading scores. Drawing from some of the results of a structural analysis (e.g., Bidwell and Kasarda, 1975), one might propose hiring more teachers or better qualified teachers. Both of these solutions, however, would raise the costs to the district and therefore conflict with the goals of administrative efficiency. Admittedly, this is an oversimplified example. It does point to the possible conflicts which may confront educational practitioners as they try to balance their roles as educators with their roles as administrators. If an analysis of schools as organizations is to be of any value to practitioners, it must be able to take account of these conflicts. To do so requires that the researcher be able to focus on the use that is made of output data (or other information) in order to reveal the internal dynamics present in the system (Sproull and Zubrow, 1981).

Conflicts between educational goals and administrative goals surface as the district translates its official public goal of providing education into specific operative goals. Operative goals are expressed in such decisions as to emphasize math and reading as opposed to arts and athletics or hiring additional teachers to improve reading scores. "Where operative

goals provide the specific content of official goals they reflect choices among competing values" (Perrow, 1974, 216). Thus, according to Perrow, operative goals are open to conflicting interests. This highlights yet another role that must be played by the educational administrator - that of politician. For better or worse, school districts are composed of at least four identifiable spheres of interest - the community, the school board, the administration, and the teachers (Bacharach and Mitchell, 1981). Each of the groups may bring a different set of values to bear on a given issue, with the consequence that determining an operative goal requires creating and maintaining consensus among these groups. How consensus is achieved thus becomes of critical importance to the analysis of schools as organizations (Bacharach and Mitchell, 1981b). Unfortunately, in examining the goals of education organizations, many researchers (e.g., Bidwell and Kasarda, 1975) treat them as if they are reified and have achieved a level of objective consensuality. This engineering approach to effectiveness is, as Hannon and Freeman (1977) point out, common to much of the organizational literature. To the degree that the school effectiveness literature examines the acceptable levels of educational goals, e.g., math and reading scores, such assumptions of consensuality may be appropriate. However, insofar as these measures of effectiveness are moderated by such things as administrative goals, the diversity of the district, and the activity of the teachers' union, the assumption of consensuality becomes precarious.

To summarize, school districts as organizations have at least three characteristics that are not adequately handled by researchers who adopt a structuralist approach. First, although there is general agreement that schools exist to provide education, measures of goal

achievement are more difficult to specify. In particular, a structuralist analysis fails to account for the distinct differences in output, structure, and process that exist between secondary and elementary schools. Second, a structuralist analysis cannot reveal the internal dynamics which exist in school systems as they try to achieve two often conflicting goals: one for educational attainment, the other for administrative efficiency. Third, efforts to resolve these conflicting goals are exacerbated by the presence of multiple interest groups, each of whom may bring a different set of values to bear on any issue. A structuralist analysis cannot capture the essence of the political process which lies behind the creation and maintenance of consensus in schools. Due to these limitations, the results of a structuralist analysis of schools are of dubious value to the educational practitioner.

C. Alternative Perspectives.

Although our presentation to this point has attempted to demonstrate the limitations of a structural analysis of schools as organizations, it should be made clear that insofar as other approaches employed in developing organizational theory share the same unstated assumptions, then they will exhibit the same limitations when applied to the study of schools. In particular, the assumption that organizations are harmonious, unified entities seriously limits the applicability of organizational theory to schools as organizations. Yet this assumption pervades the majority of organizational literature. Despite discussions of differentiation, the fact is that most of organizational theory assumes consensus and takes conflict or chaos as something that must be explained. This is probably one reason why educational practitioners lament the inapplicability of theory to their practical concerns (Cunningham, Hack and Nystrand, 1977;

Immegart and Boyd, 1979; Boyan, 1981).

There are those in organizational theory who recognize the limitations of such assumptions and have tried to develop alternative perspectives to the study of organizations. Given our discussion of the properties of schools as organizations which make such assumptions problematic, it is not surprising that one of the leading alternatives was developed by focusing on schools. We are referring to the loosely coupled systems approach elaborated by Weick (1976). In contrast to the structuralists who take the organization as the unit of analysis, the proponents of the loosely coupled system, drawing from phenomenology, go to the opposite extreme and adopt the individual as the unit of analysis. The concern with coupling arises from a need to explain how individuals come to be organized. Although this argument would, on the surface, appear to be similar to our concern with the creation and maintenance of consensus, in fact research into the loosely coupled has focused on showing that differences exist rather than that similarities are problematic (e.g., Davis, et. al., 1976). Thus, despite their theoretical differences, the proponents of loosely coupled systems seem to be heavily influenced by the same assumptions of unity that limit the structuralists. Yet "where the structuralists err in failing to consider the internal dynamics of organizations, the adherents of the loosely coupled systems approach fail to consider the structural constraints that impinge on the individual's cognitions and actions" (Bacharach, 1981: 21-22). Further, the notion of a loosely coupled system is often taken as a metaphor and applied to organizations as a whole, with a failure to show how the individual properties on which the theory is founded can be validly applied to the organization. Finally, while the notion of a loosely coupled system was elaborated by focusing on schools,

the specifics of this empirical referent have been largely forgotten as the emergent theoretical generalizations come to the forefront. The end result is the creation of an approach or perspective that is as limited as that which it was developed to critique.

If using the organization as the unit of analysis prevents one from recognizing the internal dynamics of organizations, and using the individual as the unit of analysis prevents one from recognizing the forces of cohesion, then the question arises as to what is the most appropriate unit of analysis for studying schools as organizations? We believe that a perspective which uses the group as the unit of analysis is most appropriate. From such a perspective, objective structures are considered as constraints on individual group action within an organization. By focusing on the group as the primary unit of analysis, however, we are sensitized to the differences in cognition and action that occur across groups within an organization, something not possible within the strict confines of a structuralist approach. This approach recognizes individuals but considers their membership in groups as the critical point for explaining their behavior in the organization.

In this context educational organizations emerge as political systems composed of interest groups and coalitions perpetually engaged in bargaining. Educational organizations must, therefore, be viewed as systematic political entities. The systemic component emerges from the rational interdependence dictated by the structure of the organization. The political component emerges from the differential interests and goals of various groups. Finally, the cognitive element which is part and parcel of the loosely-coupled system perspective is also incorporated here in the tactical

action of the parties.

Although the idea of considering schools as political organizations may be new to organizational theorists, the basic elements of a political perspective have been part of research in educational administration for some time. In fact, despite efforts to depoliticize the administration of schools, perspectives having political overtones began to arise in the 1930s when researchers started to examine the function and composition of school boards (Counts, 1937). School boards remained the primary focus of a political perspective, with other roles being occasionally brought in as they related to the school board (for example, the superintendent in Gross, et. al., 1958). While the 1960s did not mark the beginning of interest group politics in public education, it did signal its proliferation. Nearly all those concerned with public schools realized they had become embattled political entities, attempting to mediate the conflicting demands of such local and external political groups and institutions as parents, teachers, minorities, teachers' unions, state departments of edsucation, state legislatures, faculties of state teachers' colleges, state and federal courts, and the federal educational bureaucracy. It had become obvious that schools had to contend with competing imperatives - one of governance in community settings, one of administration, and one of educational attainment.

Despite the apparent consensus regarding the advisability of adopting a political perspective, educational researchers differ in the specific models they employ and the school district personnel they chose to study. As a consequence, there are bits and pieces of a political study of schools, but no unified approach. A brief review of a few of these studies will help to illustrate this point, while suggesting ways to

overcome the weakness of past research.

Zeigler and Jennings (1974) contributed to the political perspective by attempting to determine whether the principle of representative democracy guided the governing process of local school districts. In comparison with earlier research that focused on the composition of school boards, this research focused on the interactions between the school board, the superintendent, and the public. Moreover, by adopting representative democracy as a standard of comparison, they assess not only who governs the school district but how it is governed. The main drawback to their study is that it equates board, superintendent, and community relationships with the entire governing process. Moreover, they relied upon interviews as the sources of data, thus presenting perceptions of political participation, board responsiveness, and sources of consensus and conflict. Investigating the perceptions of consensus and conflict provides few insights into how consensus is maintained and how conflicts are resolved.

In supporting their use of a political perspective regarding school districts, Wirt and Kirst (1975) noted that:

> Educational administration is 'political' in two senses....First, educational administration is the object of activity from political influences outside the school walls. These external forces may be community groups, state and federal governments, or private forces, such as professionals or foundations. Second, educational administration is the subject of political activity, that is, its practitioners can - by their mobilization of resources, skill of leadership, and knowledge of the social territory - shape policy and behaviors within the school system.

Having recognized the interacting, interdependent elements of the school district, Wirt and Kirst proposed adopting a systems framework as their model. On the surface, a systems model would appear to provide several advantages for the study of school districts as political organizations.

First, such a framework presents a clear delineation of how schools respond to the demands in their environment. Second, the dynamic emphasis affords the researcher the opportunity to examine the structural and process components of the relationship between the school district and its environment. Third, it presents the school district as a dynamic political entity constantly interacting with various other entities. This notion of interdependence is particularly important for viewing the school district as a governmental unit embedded in a larger system of government. A final advantage of a systems framework is that its scope is sufficiently broad to avoid the narrow scope of previous models that concentrated solely on formal structure, role delineation, or community impact. While Wirt and Kirst adopted a systems framework, they failed to integrate their dynamic model with a dynamic connective concept. They identify key participants in governance and administration, but fail to provide clues as to how their activities confer authority or influence on them, or how these activities affect what actually gets done in school districts.

More recently, Smith and his associates (1981) have introduced the concept of the longitudinal nested system. This concept emphasizes the interactions of a number of discernable systems with their environment. Because they were concerned with following a trail of results through time and space, however, Smith and his associates failed to distinguish the processes by which causes in one system became results in another.

Perhaps the most thoroughly developed analysis of schools as complex political organizations is that offered by Corwin (1965). By identifying key actors and their interactions, in developing a differentiated view of the organizational environment, and by emphasizing the notion of bargaining

and adaptive strategies, Corwin has taken an important preliminary step toward developing a political model of the school system and its environment that is more comprehensive in its scope than most earlier efforts.

It is important to recognize the limitations of the work done by educational researchers. Although they have utilized elements of a political perspective, few, if any, have attempted a full analysis of schools as political organizations (Bacharach, 1981). Research has tended to focus on specific roles or linkages between roles, in many instances artificially separating internal organizational elements from external environmental concerns. Through most of its history, educational administration has placed a heavy emphasis on practice. As a result, those in educational administration have tended to rely on detailed empirical descriptions of educational systems rather than the development of broad theories of organizations. There has been a heavy use of case studies or other intensive research techniques which tend to reveal the more idiosyncratic and dynamic aspects of school systems with little effort to undertake comparative analyses. It is this tendency which leads to the adoption of elements of a political perspective. It is also this tendency which leads to a failure to develop general theories of educational administration. This failure is exacerbated by the division of educational researchers into a number of sub-fields, i.e., a fact which makes it increasingly difficult to speak of a field of educational administration.

In summary, whereas the tendency of organizational theorists to develop general theories limits their applicability to the study of schools as organizations, the tendency of educational researchers to focus on idiosyncratic aspects of schools and their subsequent failure to develop

any general theory is equally debilitating to the generation of knowledge that will be useful to both scholars and practitioners. What is needed is a middle ground which recognizes the unique properties of schools as organizations and proceeds to develop general theories based on these properties. Only then will it be possible to put forth a perspective which presents a realistic image of schools as organizations with direct implications for the development and refinement of theory, research, and practice. It is our contention that a fully developed political perspective offers the best foundation for the creation of such practical theory (Bacharach and Mitchell, 1981a).

II. Schools as Political Organizations.

Having put forth the proposition that the analysis of schools as political organizations can serve as a solid foundation for the development of practical theory, we must now proceed to elaborate on what we mean by a political perspective and how it applies to schools. We will attempt to accomplish both of these objectives in this section of the paper.

A. The Elements of a Political Perspective.

Adopting a political perspective of schools as complex organizations requires that we account for the following:

1. Educational organizations are best conceived of as political systems, both internally and in their external relationships. In educational organizations, at all levels, constant tactical power struggles occur in an effort to obtain control over real or symbolic resources. Whether these struggles occur between the superintendent and the school board, between the school board and the state, or between principals and teachers is not the important consideration. It is essential to accept the dynamics of power struggles over resources as

integral to any organizational analysis.

2. In educational organizations, participants can be conceived of as political actors with their own needs, objectives, and strategies to achieve those objectives. While there may be some apparent consensus regarding the normative goals of educational organizations, e.g., education, the weight given to different subgoals and the strategies used to pursue them will differ depending upon which actors are questioned.

3. The decision-making process is the primary arena of political conflict. Each subgroup can be expected to approach a decision with the objective of maximizing its specific interests or goals rather than the maximization of some general organizational objective. Unless some aspect of the question involves their self-interest, any group may decide not to become involved in a specific decision. For those who perceive an issue as related to their self-interest, however, the decision-making process becomes the arena in which to attempt to ensure that the decision outcome reflects their self-interests.

4. Each subgroup will also have a different view of who has the formal power (authority), who has the informal power (influence), or who should have the power to make organizational decisions. A group's efforts to have their point of view reflected in the decision outcome centers in large part around questions of authority and influence. In order to have one's viewpoint represented requires that others agree that your view should be considered, i.e., that you should have influence over the decision. The level of agreement or congruence between parties over who has or should have authority and influence over various decisions is constrained by the structure of educational organizations, their work processes, and the different goals of groups.

5. Given the importance of the decision-making process and groups' efforts to have their views reflected in decision outcomes, the nature of congruence with regard to where power lies in the decision-making process is consequential for the level of conflict and ultimately for educational quality.

6. The ability of a single individual or group to have its interests represented in the decision-making process is often limited. As a consequence, in educational organizations coalitions of actors emerge, identify collective objectives, and devise strategies to achieve those objectives. For example, the power of individual teachers or groups of teachers is limited, but the power of a coalition of teachers, i.e., the union, is often substantial. Should the teachers' union elicit the support of the PTA, an even more influential coalition could result. The formation of coalitions is constrained by organizational structures, ideologies, and environment. For example, the type of coalitions that emerge and the strategies which they follow will depend greatly on whether we are dealing with a large, highly bureaucratic school district or a small, non-bureaucratic school district; whether the community is liberal or conservative; or whether the district population is well educated or poorly educated. In other words, the coalitions which emerge, the collective objectives which they identify, and the strategies which they use to achieve these objectives will be determined to a large degree by the various combinations of structures, ideologies, and environment.

7. In any school district, there are likely to be a number of different coalitions either in existence or capable of being formed. The dominant coalition is that coalition of actors which controls the authority structure and resources of the organization at a given point in time; their actions and orientations can be described in terms of

their logiques d'action (perspective from the point of view of the observer that gives their actions meaning and coherence).

8. Although a dominant coalition may remain in place for an extended period of time either through astute political maneuvering or the relative quiescence of the district, no coalition is sacrosanct. A dialectical relationship exists between the organizational structures, ideologies, and environment and the emergence and aspirations of coalitions. Coalitions emerge in reaction to structures, ideologies, and environment and in turn reformulate and institutionalize structures, work processes, and ideologies which engender over time, a reaction from emergent coalitions. The rotation of coalitions on school boards illustrates this process. The point is that educational organizations must be seen as political entities that shape and are shaped by their environmental and organizational context.

9. The dialectic presented above as a critical component of a political analysis of schools occurs over time and within a specific context. This means that educational organizations are best understood in terms of a historical perspective and in terms of the specificity and structure of the institutional system of which they are a part (Bacharach, 1982).

B. Three Fundamental Questions.

Taking account of the elements of a political perspective presented above essentially involves a recognition that schools as organizations are arenas whose output is greatly modified by the interests and cognitive orientations of the component interest groups. If we are to understand the operation of educational organizations as political entities, it is necessary to answer three fundamental questions. These are: 1) who or what are the component interest groups in the school system?; 2) what are the primary linkages between these interest groups?; and 3) what is the

basic "logic of action" embedded in each interest group? We will consider each of these questions in turn.

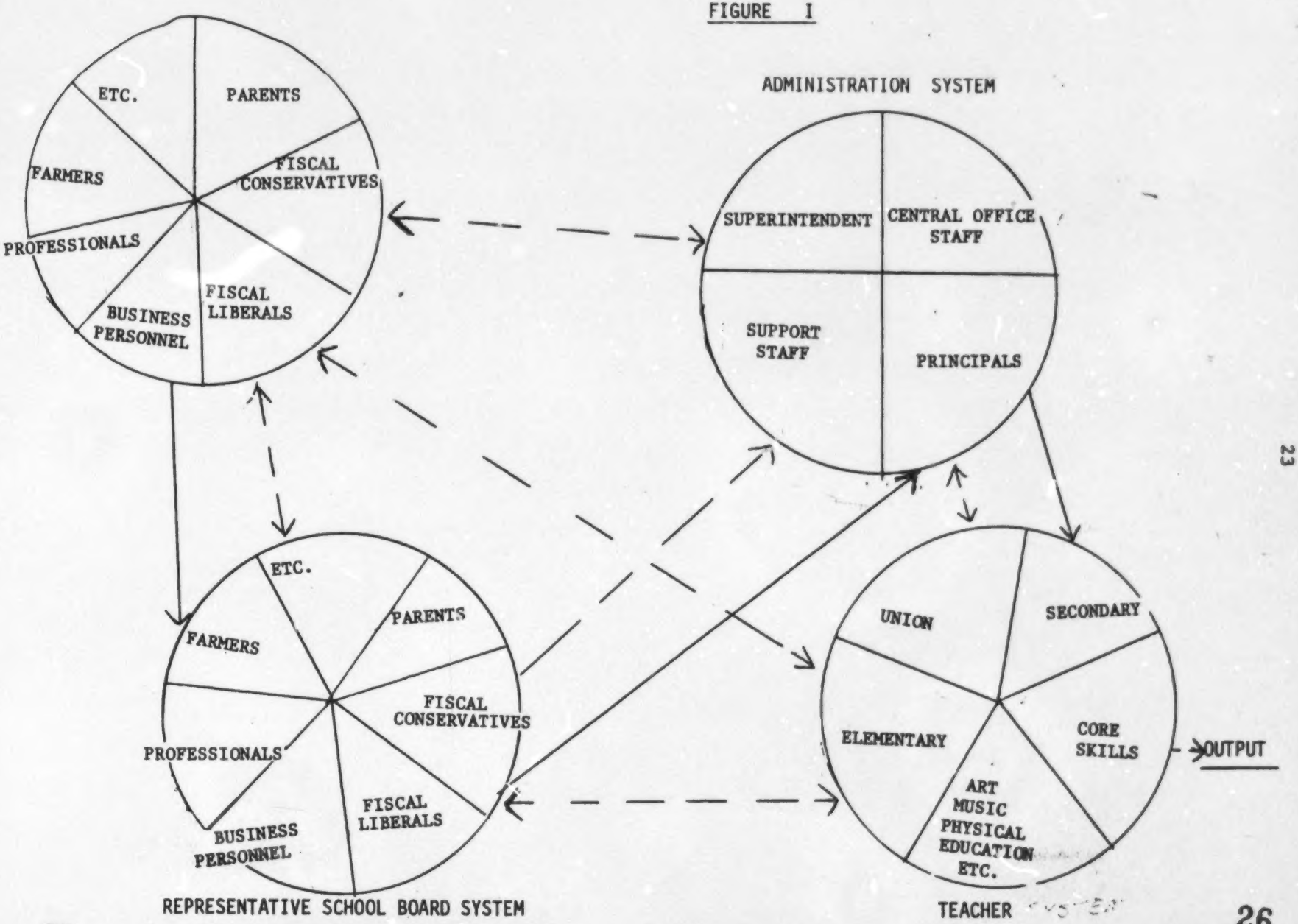
1. Component Interest Groups: Schools as Multi-systems.

As already noted in connection with the work of Smith and others (e.g., Bacharach and Mitchell, 1981b), a school district is a multi-system; it is a system of systems. "Each of these parts is a miniature social system in itself" (Smith, 1981). Figure 1 provides examples of these systems, and the potential sub-groups in the individual systems. While the examples within the circles do not exhaust the possibilities of the significant participant groups, they provide a sense of the coalitions and interest groups which may participate or attempt to participate in a decision.

Two significant points should be made here. First, each of the systems is identifiable by function, and is relatively autonomous. Each has rights and responsibilities, methods of decision-making, and constraints upon its actions. In short, each is an identifiable functional entity. The community of citizens oversees a public institution; the school board makes policy in accordance with the demands of the citizens; the administration manages in accordance with the policies; and the teachers perform the hands-on operations in accordance with management's decisions. Obviously, such identifications are extremely indefinite because it is difficult to find the boundaries, and because the linkages are so complex that a change in one segment requires adjustments with others (Oettinger and Marks, 1974). Indefinite though the identifications of the systems may be, they do indicate each system's legitimation for participation in decision-making. It is wort noting that each system participates on the basis of what is ordinarily a legal definition of

COMMUNITY SYSTEM

FIGURE I



its function. Moreover, in times of conflict, each group may argue not only the "rightness" of its specific position, but will more importantly define the issue in terms of its own identifiable function. Thus, a decision to cut an administrator of an affirmative action program may be viewed by the community as a serious threat to minority protections and coded as a budgetary necessity by the school board. In discussions of class size, one finds administrators mentioning finance and child population statistics while teachers speak of pedigogical technique.

A second point that proceeds from the autonomous identities of the participant systems concerns the decision to participate. All four of the identifiable groups may not choose to participate in every decision. For example, in a choice between purchasing new school buses and multiplying the trips of current buses by staggering students' arrival and leaving times, citizens may be concerned with such things as the general traffic patterns in the community, cost, students' being out of school until mid-morning, and students' arriving home after dark. In addition to reflecting the concerns of the community, the school board may be very strongly committed to the staggered schedule, having already determined that the staggered schedule with its costs of increased driver time and mechanical depreciation is significantly less expensive than would be the purchase of new buses with its costs of increased driver positions and new equipment. School administrators may be concerned with questions of congestion around the buildings and the disruption of classes as students arrive and depart. Teachers, as a group, may be entirely disinterested and not attempt to participate. As a result of decisions to participate or not to participate, only a specific set of actors is liable to be involved in any specific issue. Identifying those actors is an exercise

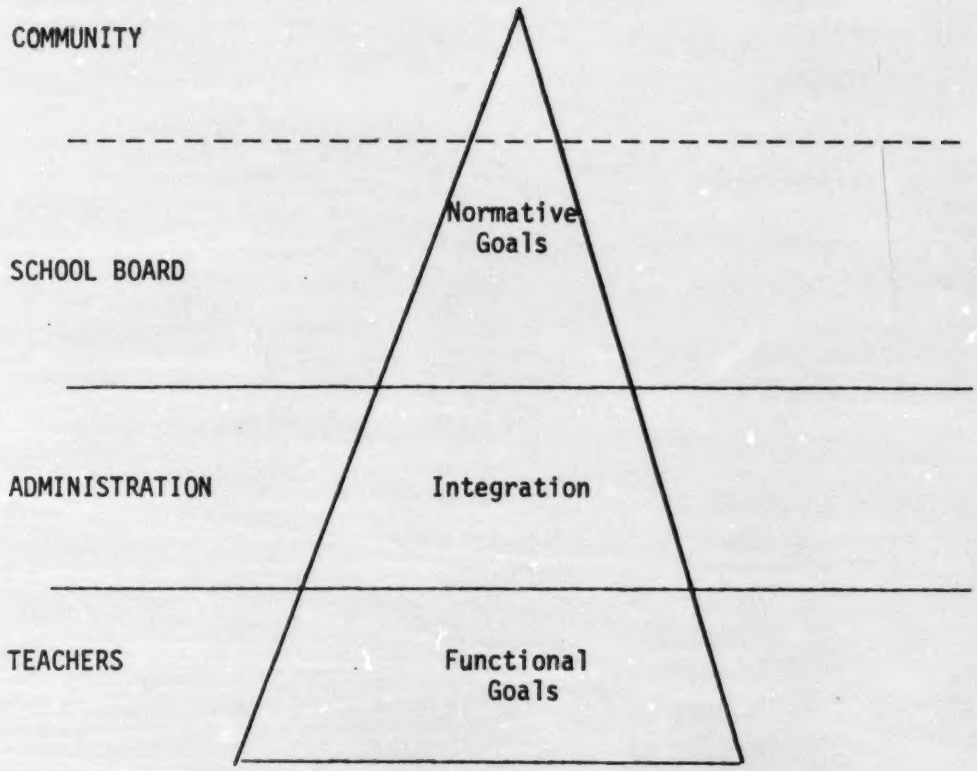
in delineating the operative network in the district (Bacharach, Lawler, and Mitchell, 1983).

2. Primary Linkages Between Groups: Authority and Influence.

Authority refers to the final decision-making power that resides in various positions in the organization. In school districts, teachers have the authority to assign learning activities to children; principals have the authority to assign children to classes; superintendents have the authority to assign teachers to schools; school boards have the authority to select superintendents; and the community has the authority to elect school board members. In short, each position in a district is vested with authority over specific issues by virtue of its place in the organizational structure. In addition, as shown by the solid lines in Figure 1, the systems in the district are arranged hierarchically in terms of authority (Smith, 1981). This means that each system, by virtue of its authority, places constraints upon the authority of the lower systems. Thus, the authority structure represents a fundamental linkage between actors in the school system. It is within this structure that the goals of the school system are pursued.

Figure 2 is a graphic representation of the relationship between the four systems in a school district as they are generally assumed to operate. As reflected in the figure, it is assumed that the school board, as elected representatives of the community, perpetuates the normative framework underlying district policy. That is, it is the school board and its composite members who set the tone for the dominant educational ideology. Over the last ten years the shifts from progressive education to an emphasis on basic skills have been most dramatically reflected by the ideological composition of school boards. The politics of school

FIGURE 2: TYPE I - THE NORMATIVELY INTEGRATED SCHOOL DISTRICT



boards over the decade of the 70s took on such overarching normative and ideological labels as liberal, conservative, etc. Teachers, in that sense, were often caught in the ideological revolving door created by the changing normative framework of the school boards, for unlike the boards, teachers are primarily concerned with the basic tasks of education. The role of translating the normative expectations of school boards into executable tasks for teachers and lower echelon administrators falls generally to the superintendent and the principals. That is, it is their function to serve not simply as the supervisors for their subordinates, but also as the translators of ideology into specific policy. Such a situation is reflected in the Type I Normatively Integrated school district. Its assumptions are: a specified ideology on the part of the school board, the ability of the administrators to translate normative expectations into executable, functional goals, and a teaching corp whose own professional orientation is congruent with the normative goals of the board.

Three points need to be made regarding the notion of a normatively integrated school district. First is that the authority structure on which it rests requires that each actor recognize the legitimacy of the decision-making power of other actors. Authority can only be exercised if the individual, superiors, and subordinates all acknowledge the power of the individual to make the decision. The failure of consensus as to who has authority over an issue is one point of conflict within school districts. For example, as noted earlier, in discussions of class size, one finds administrators mentioning financial and child population statistics, while teachers speak of pedagogical technique. Each group may argue not only the "rightness" of its specific position, but will also define the issue in terms of its own function. The conflict here is not

only about the number of children in a room, it is also a challenge of the authority of the superintendent to make that decision. Teachers challenge on the basis of their pedigogical expertise, and superintendents defend on the basis of their systemwide, financial responsibilities. Such challenges pose a direct threat to the apparent stability of a normatively integrated school district.

Challenges to authority are most likely to arise when there is a lack of consensus over goals. Where challenges to authority represent a lack of consensus regarding organizational form, lack of consensus over goals relates to organizational content (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980). As we will see, the two need not go together; therefore, the conceptual distinction is important to keep in mind. Disagreement over goals may occur at either the normative or the functional level. Disagreement at the normative level deals with the assumptions behind the basic direction of district policy, while disagreement at the functional level deals with how an agreed upon policy is to be implemented.

Lack of consensus over normative goals is much more disruptive to school district operations than disagreement over functional goals. It is not surprising, then, that districts tend to alter potentially normative disagreements into functional disagreements. One reason for this is the fact that challenges to authority occur within a very limited range. There are certain rights which are sacrosanct and which can be used to reinforce the normative framework. Thus, community members may agree that the school board has the authority to make policy, but turn the school board members out of office for taking a position contrary to community desires. The superintendent has the authority to administer the district, but will be fired if administrative decisions are not in keeping with policy goals. Teachers have authority to teach, but will be

sanctioned if their methods are not in accordance with administrative procedures. The stability of the basic authority structure is used to present an image of consensus over normative goals. As Meyer and Rowan (1977) note, there is a logic of confidence operating which helps to avoid the disruption of normative disagreement. It is because of this that it is generally assumed that all districts are normatively integrated. Further, when challenges to normative integration do arise, they are couched within the framework of a normatively integrated school district.

We have argued that challenges to normative integration occur when an actor or group either questions someone's authority or disagrees with the district's normative or functional goals. Such challenges will usually focus on specific issues and represent an effort on the part of an actor to have his or her self-interest reflected in decisions regarding that issue. Given the relative resiliency of the authority structure, the question arises how these interests come to be expressed. The answer is through the exercise of influence.

Influence functions less formally than authority and is less obvious. The sources of influence reside in the individuals and in the groups individuals represent. A single citizen may exert little influence, but if speaking for the business community, that individual is in a strong position to influence a decision. All members of the school board are equal in authority, but the financial expert is more influential in financial decisions by virtue of the grasp of financial matters. An effort by the superintendent to control the agenda of a school board meeting and thus to control the flow of information is not an effort to coopt school board authority, but an effort to ensure that the administrative voice is the most influential. While the teacher system possesses less authority

than the other systems and is at the lowest end of the hierarchy, teachers do have the capacity to influence decisions because they control the classroom technology, share the goals of other professional educators, and are represented by a formal group, i.e., the teachers' union. The point is that while the number of individuals who have authority over an issue is severely limited, the number who can influence is almost limitless. This is reflected in Figure 1, where the broken lines indicate the influence network; they show every system influencing and being influenced by every other system.

Identifying which lines of influence are actually present in a district, i.e., the district's influence network, is an important task for researchers utilizing a political perspective. Although the specific form of the influence network will vary from district to district, the general impact of the exercise of influence on the roles played by various actors is limited. At one extreme is the Type III normatively inverse district pictured in Figure 3-B. In such a district, it is the teachers' normative orientations that are most visible. In such a situation, the administrators become mediators rather than translators of school board policy. For the most part, it is only in times of crisis that school boards become concerned with functional issues and teachers with normative positions. Generally, most school districts occupy a middle ground between normative integration and normative inversion. This position, a Type II politically discrete district, is shown in Figure 3-A. In such districts, school boards have both a normative and a functional orientation. Likewise teachers have both normative and functional orientations. Administrators, therefore, are faced both with translating policy and mediating. Clearly the mix is neither proportionally even

FIGURE 3-A: TYPE II POLITICALLY DISCRETE SCHOOL DISTRICT

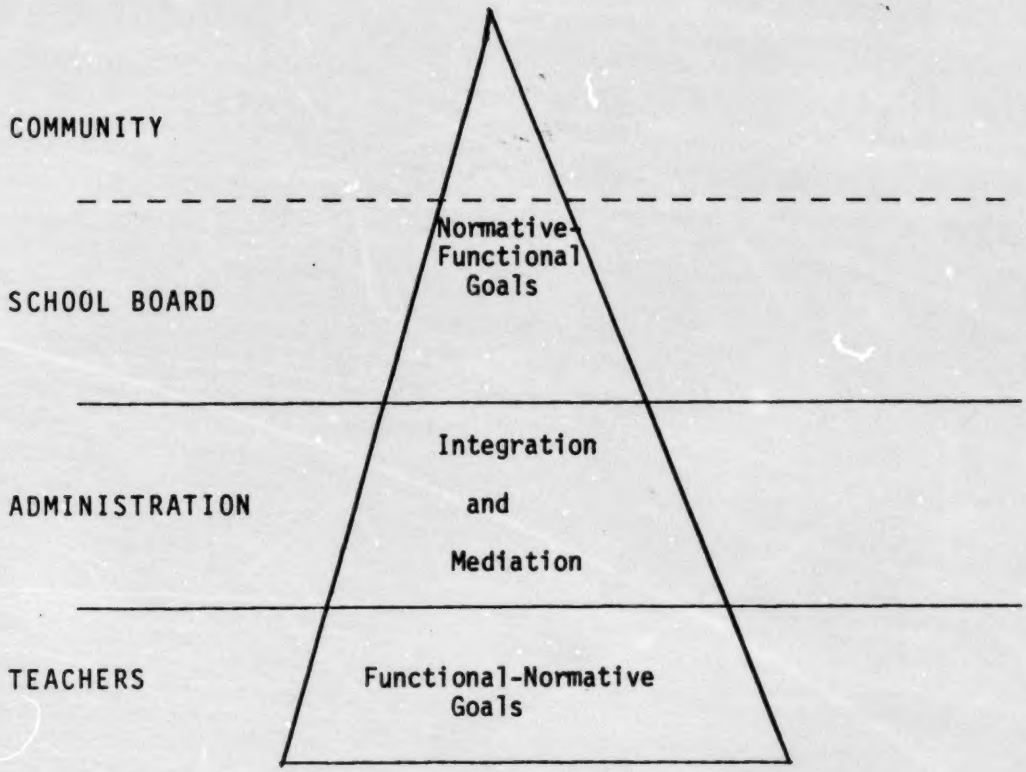
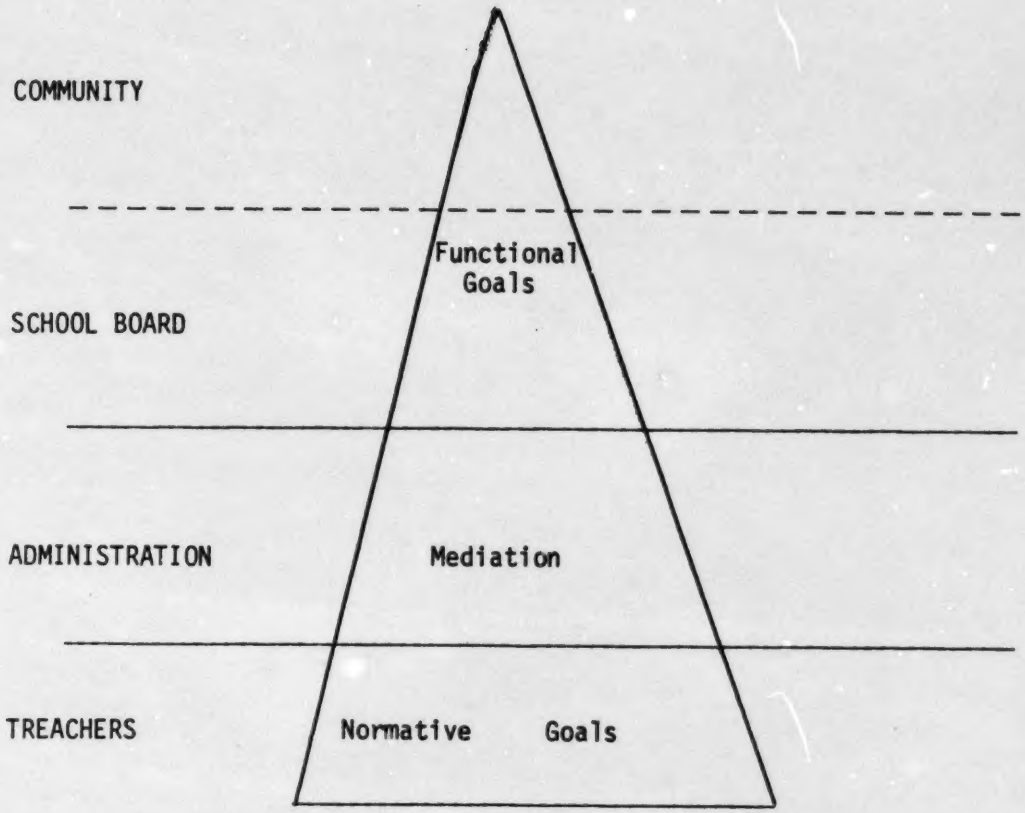


FIGURE 3-B: TYPE III - NORMATIVELY INVERSE SCHOOL DISTRICT



nor consistent over time. Thus the primary orientation of most school boards is normative, while their secondary orientation is functional; likewise, the daily demands of the job make the teachers' primary orientation functional, and their secondary orientation normative. Which functions are emphasized, and therefore what type the school district will approximate, will be a function of the issues which arise and the orientations the various actors take toward those issues.

3. "Logic of Action" Embedded in Each Interest Group: Strategies and Tactics.

Challenges to normative integration or the effort to exert influence within the normative framework revolve around specific issues. The issues may be imposed upon the district by its environment, as in the case of federally mandated programs or state budget rules, or they may arise from within the district itself as part of its routine operations. While it is important to recognize the sources which may generate issues, the source itself is not as crucial as the various actor's perceptions of the issue and their reaction to it. From a political perspective, it is the dynamics of the decision process surrounding specific issues that energize the system. Tracking actors' perceptions and reactions - their decisions to participate or not to participate, their efforts to have their interests reflected in the decision outcome - are at the core of a political analysis of schools as organizations.

A political analysis assumes, then, that individual actors will view each issue that arises in terms of their own self-interests. For example, in making up the school budget, principals of small schools in the outskirts of the district want their concerns to carry the same weight as those of principals from larger, more centrally located schools. Farmers who develop

financial security in land and equipment may vie with teachers, administrators, and other community members about the importance of a pension plan. What then becomes important is how each actor attempts to ensure that his/her interests are represented. What are the strategies and tactics used by the actors in the district?

The selection of strategies and tactics by an actor depends upon the actor's perception of the district and the other actors positions in the district. The notion of a "logic of action" presumes that the strategies and tactics selected represent a rational outcome given the actors perception of the situation. It follows that strategies and tactics will be determined, in part, by the history and structure of the school district.

Two broad classes of strategies and tactics may be identified. The first involves the use by an individual actor of some expertise, authority, or work related behaviors. Generally these represent elements available to the individual by virtue of his/her position in the organization. For example, a member of the community may attempt to exert influence as a taxpayer or as a parent. Members of the community may threaten to mobilize, expressing public protest at school board meetings or in letters to the editor of the local paper. School board members may threaten to vote against an issue, or may use their position to obtain or disseminate information on a specific issue. Administrators rely on their expertise as a basis of influence, but are not adverse to skillful manipulation of information as a form of influence (Bacharach and Mitchell, 1981b). Teachers also rely on their expertise as a basis of influence, falling back to the threatened withdrawal of services (e.g., job action or strike) only under crisis conditions. The point is that in choosing

strategies and tactics, the actor's initial search is most likely to focus on those which are immediately available, namely those which involve individual action. If an actor believes that individual action will be sufficient to influence the decision outcome, then the search for viable strategy and tactics need go no further.

For many actors, however, individual influence is extremely limited. In that case, the individual may broaden his/her search for viable strategies and tactics by considering the formation of a coalition with other actors and/or interest groups. By forming a coalition, the actor can then bring not only his/her own expertise and authority to bear, but the expertise and authority of the coalition partner as well. For example, by coalescing with either the community or the board, the teachers would bring both classroom expertise and either the threat of community mobilization or the use of the board's vote to bear on an issue, effectively blocking administrative action. Were this to occur for an extended period and involve issues related to normative goals, the district would approach our Type III characterization of normative inversion. As with individual strategies and tactics, actors rely on their expertise, authority, or work related behaviors to influence a decision. In a coalition, however, the range and scope of activities that can be brought to bear is much greater.

A variety of coalitions are possible in a district. In evaluating potential coalition partners, an actor usually looks for someone who is either neutral or undecided on an issue, or someone whose self-interest favors a similar decision outcome as that desired by the actor. If a potential partner is neutral or undecided, the actor may try to persuade them to the actor's position. Alternatively, the actor may try to establish a trade-off, possibly to assist the partner in the future for help

in the present (Bacharach and Lawler, 1981). For example, teachers may try to persuade members of the PTA to support their position, while school board members may trade votes on issues. Where a coalition partner's self-interest lies in a similar decision outcome, an actor's efforts are likely to focus on clarifying that fact to the potential partner.

Although coalitions may form around specific issues, they do not always dissolve with the resolution of an issue. When a powerful coalition remains in place over time, it may effectively control school district policy. The district becomes what they say it is. For example, on one school district we observed (Bacharach and Mitchell, 1981b), the superintendent and a majority faction of the school board constituted the dominant coalition in the district. Although challenged by other groups such as the teachers and the minority faction of the school board, there was no single group or coalition of groups with sufficient influence to replace the dominant coalition in the district. This coalition had enough power through the superintendent's control over his administration and the majority faction's control over school board votes to insure the district was run as they saw fit. Further, the strategies and tactics employed (such as the superintendent's control over information and the majority faction's ties to the community elite) were consistent with their perception of their roles and responsibilities as school district officials in a particular school district. In a similar manner, those who challenged the dominant coalition also followed a consistent set of rules or expectations. As a consequence, there was an underlying logic to what often appeared to be a choatic and conflictual state of affairs. The ultimate aim of a political analysis is to uncover this logic.

Identifying the logic underlying district activity can also help clarify important points of change in a district. From a political perspective, the most important change centers around alteration of the dominant coalition and/or authority structure of the district. For example, in one district we observed (Bacharach and Mitchell, 1981b), a taxpayer's group concerned over rising school costs was able to mobilize sufficient community support to gain a majority of seats on the school board. This coalition was able to oust the superintendent from office, alter the content and definition of other administrative roles, and to undertake a review of the district curriculum with an eye toward adapting a more fundamental or back-to-basics approach to education. Shocked by some of these actions, a rival coalition consisting of teachers, parent groups, and members of the community elite was formed, and after intensive campaigning, was able to replace the taxpayer's group as the majority faction of the school board. This new coalition then proceeded to implement a series of its own changes in school district policy. A political perspective provides a means of analyzing these changes, changes which would go unnoticed by a structural analysis and would appear totally chaotic to a descriptive analysis.

To conclude, the elements of a political perspective combine with the questions which are fundamental to a political analysis present a realistic image of school districts as organizations. It is an image which is capable of capturing the logic underlying the often apparent chaos of school district activity, while also highlighting areas in which significant change is likely to occur. As such, it is a perspective which holds promise for both researchers and practitioners.

III. The Generation of Practical Theory.

The basic appeal being made in this paper is for the generation of practical theory. By practical theory, we mean theories of organization which are general enough to be of interest to organizational theorists, yet specific enough to be of use to practitioners. To demonstrate the need for and value of practical theory, we have focused on the study of school districts as organizations. We saw that the dominant perspectives in organizational theory are too general to capture the specific dynamics of school districts, while the approaches which have been used in educational research are too specific to allow for useful generalization. To overcome these limitations, we advocated the use of a political analysis for the study of schools as organizations. Political approaches to the study of organizations have received increasing attention in recent years (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980; Pfeffer, 1981), and the application of a political perspective to a specific type of organization promises to help refine the theoretical framework of these approaches. It also offers a viable theory of schools as organizations for use by educational researchers, something which has been lacking in the past (Cunningham, Hark, and Nystrand, 1977; Immegart and Boyd, 1979; Boyan, 1981).

The results of a political analysis of schools as organizations also have direct implications for educational practitioners. From a political perspective, educational administrators play a critical role mediating between the various systems in the district in an effort to integrate diverse perspectives and achieve the consensus necessary to ensure district operations. As we have seen, the structure of the organization has a direct effect on the political dynamics of a district. If we consider organizational design (i.e., the development of organizational structure) as a matter of

strategic choice (Child, 1972), then a political analysis of schools as organizations should be able to suggest design alternatives which would assist in the achievement of consensus. To illustrate this, we will outline briefly some possible structural arrangements that might be employed to deal with each of the major actors in a school district.

The structure of the school district affects the creation and maintenance of consensus by specifying what authority each actor has, what information each actor has access to, and what work related activities each actor may engage in. Viewing organizational design as a strategic choice, the aim would be to create a design which would provide actors with only that authority, information, and activity necessary to achieve consensus. Too little might cause unrest as actors seek out more information or authority, while too much may create conflict between actors who feel their "rights" are being infringed upon by another. Exactly what is the proper design will vary from district to district, but several possibilities can be presented.

First, consider the community. As public institutions, schools are ultimately responsible to the community. Yet the community as a whole is often apathetic; the real danger to the achievement of consensus arises when community groups mobilize around an issue (Bacharach and Mitchell, 1981b). Thus, the critical question is what structures can be used to forestall such mobilization? A district may consider establishing a public relations position, whose responsibility would be to disseminate information to the public and to keep tabs on community sentiment. One might also consider establishing a file system in this department to keep track of voting in the various segments of the district in order to identify where mobilization is most likely to occur. Alternatively,

administrators could be required to address community groups to maintain contact between the public and the school. Involving the community in district decision-making through the formation of community advisory groups for specific issues is another possibility. The attempt here would be to defuse criticism by providing a forum for its expression. The feasibility of this strategy, or of any strategy for dealing with the community, will depend to a great deal on the diversity of the community (Bacharach and Mitchell, 1981b). The more diverse the community, the greater care that must be taken in handling community affairs. On the other hand, a community exhibiting little or no diversity may require relatively little attention.

The school board is the legitimate authority in terms of school district policy. The primary challenges to consensus arise when the board is split into factions and/or when the board tries to extend the scope of its authority beyond district policy. Therefore, structures which can address these two areas should make achieving consensus less difficult. In terms of a factionalized board, one of the primary design decisions would revolve around whether to use a system of committees or to rely on the board as a whole. A committee system may defuse critiques by allowing board members to become involved in specific areas of expertise. On the other hand, this level of involvement may result in extended, in-depth questions which would slow board activity. In that case, the committee on the whole may be a better alternative. Often, the development of factions centers around access to information. Board members may be allowed to solicit information on their own from any school personnel, they may receive information from all administrators, or all information

may be channeled through the superintendent. These alternatives represent different structures, the appropriateness of which will depend upon the district's particular circumstances. In general, the key element in dealing with the board is to get the board to accept a role equivalent to a board of directors (Bacharach, Lawler, and Mitchell, 1983). If this can be achieved, then questions regarding involvement in non-policy issues and access to information become less important.

Before the school board can act like a board of directors, however, the administration itself must be in order. Threats to consensus may arise in the administration due to insufficient breadth of expertise or a lack of unity in the administration (Bacharach and Mitchell, 1981b). In order for the administration to act as mediator and/or integrator, it must possess sufficient expertise to relate to all of the other parties in the district on their own level. More importantly, it must possess sufficient expertise to answer any challenges posed to it by others. Two forms of structure may be employed to handle this problem. In the first, every administrator is a generalist who must possess knowledge of a number of different areas. This is usually only feasible in smaller school districts. In larger districts, the use of specialized administrators is the more common alternative. In either case, the administration must possess sufficient degrees and breadth of expertise in order to operate effectively. Of course the possession of expertise within the administration will do no good if the administration itself cannot act as a unit. While conflict within the administration may occur on a number of levels, the relationship between the principals and the central office is particularly troublesome (Bacharach, Lawler, and Mitchell, 1983). Principals expect

to be granted a high degree of autonomy in running their buildings, an expectation which often conflicts with the centralization imposed by central office administrators. One possible solution to this is to establish a principal's committee which would address areas of conflict. Alternatively, one could institute a rotation of principals through the schools to establish loyalty to the district rather than a specific school. Both alternatives attempt to develop a sense of unity within the administration.

One area in which the potential conflict between the principals and central office is readily apparent is labor relations. The ability of principals to establish rapport with their staffs helps in the creation and maintenance of consensus, at least on the school level. Inconsistency in the handling of labor relations across schools, however, threatens consensus at the district level where teachers are represented by a union. To avoid this, at least two structural arrangements could be considered. In one, a centralized office of labor relations could be established, with all labor relations matters being channeled through that office. Again, this sort of specialization is most feasible in larger districts. In smaller districts, the superintendent may serve in this position. In either case, educating the principals as to what they can and cannot do under the contract should also be undertaken. A second structural arrangement would involve the establishment of labor-management committees on the school and/or district level. These committees would address specific issues of concern to teachers not covered under the union contract. By addressing teacher's concerns, the likelihood of threats to consensus arising are diminished.

Obviously, these are not the only implications for organizational design that can be drawn from a political analysis of schools as organizations. Nor is the practical utility of a political analysis of schools limited to recommendations for organizational design. Our intention was merely to provide a demonstration of potential practical application. The fact that this can be done, combined with the theoretical value of a political analysis for organizational theorists and educational researchers, supports our conviction that viewing schools as political organizations is a first step toward the generation of a practical theory of schools as organizations.

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